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SOUTH ASIA SERIES
Vol. XII No. 7
(Afghanistan)

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AFGHANISTAN: 1968

Part IV: Strikes and Demonstrations

by Louis Dupree

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MAY 10 1969

American Universities Field Staff

[LD-7-'68]

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Part IV: Strikes and Demonstrations

by Louis Dupree

August 1968

Although there was agitation earlier in the year among workers and the students have periodically been involved in strikes and demonstrations since the Sehum-i-Aqrab riots of 1965, the major disturbances of 1968 took place after May 1 and continue even today. (See the chart on page 4 for an outline of the major strikes and demonstrations in late spring and early summer of this year.) To understand the agitation today, it will be helpful to look briefly again at events which I have written about in previous Reports.[1]

On every October 25 (Sehum-i-Aqrab in the Afghan calendar) since 1965, students have held demonstrations in honor of those killed on that tragic day. It will be remembered that the 1965 riots followed upon the attempt of Dr. Mohammad Yousuf, the Prime Minister-designate, to form a new government, as requested by the King, after the free elections in August and September of that year. Unused to formal parliamentary procedures, the Wolesi Jirgah quickly split into warring factions and the maintenance of order became difficult. Dr. Yousuf himself was subjected to much denunciation and abuse, particularly from a vocal group on the far left dominated by Babrak Karmal and Dr. Anahita (a woman deputy from Kabul); and finally, on October 21, being much disturbed, he appeared before the Wolesi Jirgah and made a dramatic appeal to the members to cease their unsubstantiated accusations and to be prepared to approve or reject him, his cabinet, and his policies in three days.

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[1] See Louis Dupree, Afghanistan: 1966 (LD-4-'66), American Universities Field Staff Reports, South Asia Series, Vol. X, No. 4, July 1966.

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Although the Prime Minister-designate had very considerable support (indeed he would probably have won approval by a large majority had the vote been held following his speech), in an attempt to thwart him Babrak and his followers encouraged dissident students to appear in Parliament on October 24, the day when Yousuf was to present his government for approval. The students filled the spectators' gallery in the Wolesi Jirgah and overflowed onto the floor, where they sat in the deputies' seats and refused to leave until "our rights have been granted" and "the dishonest rascals have been driven from government." As the disruption was total and the students ignored all pleas to leave, Dr. Zahir, the President of the Wolesi Jirgah, had no choice but to adjourn until October 25. The students cheered, believing that they had won a "victory," and Babrak exhorted them to return the next day and "every day until our rights have been granted."

Following this, on the night of October 24, the worried and confused Interim Government (headed by Dr. Yousuf) made preparations for the worst, while the Wolesi Jirgah decided by a straw vote, as it had a right to do under the Constitution, to hold a closed session on the following day. That day—October 25, 1965—was to be a day of tragedy. Demonstrations began at seven o'clock in the morning and continued until a little after five that afternoon, when Afghan troops fired on a group of students near the home of Dr. Yousuf. Three people died and scores were injured.

It is not necessary here to again try to apportion the blame for this tragedy. Clearly it was shared by several factions: by the Interim Government (for not recognizing the threat earlier and for calling out armed troops when the police could probably have controlled the situation); by the Wolesi Jirgah (for its orgy of inflammatory denunciation—and especially by Babrak and his followers for their attempt to pervert incipient democratic processes); by the university authorities (for not maintaining control over the students and not punishing the ringleaders of the first demonstrations); and by the students (for blindly following the well-tutored ringleaders). It is important to remember, however, that perhaps only some 2,000 of Kabul's more than 20,000 students participated in the demonstrations.

In the wake of the riots, Dr. Yousuf resigned on October 29 because of "ill health," and the King appointed Mohammad Hashim Maiwandwal (a former Ambassador to the United States and Pakistan and the Minister of Press and Information in Dr. Yousuf's interim cabinet) as Prime Minister. He was approved by the Wolesi Jirgah on November 2.

All schools in Kabul had been closed after the tragedy. They reopened on November 1, and on November 3 the students of Kabul University held a day-long sit-down strike in front of the University's administration building to demand that those responsible for the deaths be punished (the demonstrators, of course, considering themselves blameless) and that students and faculty members who had been jailed be released. They also demanded permission to organize a student union for political debating.

On November 4, a memorial rally for the shaheed (martyrs) killed on Sehum-i-Aqrab was held by the Kabul University students, and Prime Minister Maiwandwal (functioning as acting Minister of Education) dramatically appeared on the campus to speak to the students himself. He expressed the regrets of the King and of the new government for the tragic events and promised a prompt investigation. He said that legitimate student demands would be considered, that a student union would be sanctioned, and that no students remained in jail.[2]

Maiwandwal won the day—in fact, students, thinking that they had won the day, hoisted him onto their shoulders and paraded him through the campus. It gave the government a much-needed breathing spell, but strikes and demonstrations have continued sporadically ever since.

Student strikes have usually involved demands for the reform of the curriculum, for graduate programs, and for changes in admission policies. The workers' demands, too, have been rather uniform: for pay raises, better working conditions, annual leave, reduced working hours (i.e., a half-holiday on Thursday to precede the weekly religious holiday, Friday), annual bonuses, co-operative stores, free transportation to and from work, and health and medical insurance.

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[2] A committee had been appointed by the Wolesi Jirgah to take action and the students had been released from jail, but the investigation died quickly. One teacher from the Faculty of Science, Engineer Mohammad Osman, an American-educated leftist dwarf, was given a two-year sentence for his part in instigating the demonstrations and was still in jail when I wrote of these events in 1966. He was later released, however, only to be rearrested during the workers' strike at Jangalak in mid-June 1968. Osman had grown long hair and a beard in imitation of his hero, Che Guevara. Like Che, he seems to court martyrdom.

A CHRONOLOGY OF SELECTED WORKER AND/OR STUDENT STRIKES AND DEMONSTRATIONS: 1968

Month	Workers	Students
April	Strike at Kohsar Construction Co., Kabul	Strike of students in Nimroz Province against unfair punishment.
May	Strike of Jangalak workers, Kabul (agitation since February). Strike at Government Printing Press, Kabul, on May 26. Strike of government bus and lorry drivers, Kabul, on May 28. Strike at Pul-i-Charkhi textile and bicycle assembly plants near Kabul. Strike at Qandahar Woolen Mill on May 30. Strike at Ghouri Cement Plant, Pul-i-Khumri on May 30. Strike of Pul-i-Khumri textile workers. Strike of petroleum workers, Shibarghan. March toward Kabul (turned back at Salang Pass). Strike of asphalting unit of Pul-i-Khumri-Shibarghan road project for back pay.	Strike of 2,000 high-school students who had failed Kabul University entrance examinations. Strikes at Afghan Institute of Technology (West German sponsored), Technicum, School of Nursing, Teachers Training School on May 21; demonstrations, one or two killed in clash, students parade with bloody shirts. Strike of Kabul University Faculties of Theology, Law, and Medicine for graduate programs.
June	Strike at Spinzar Cotton Co., Qunduz, on June 2 to 4. Strike at Education Press, Kabul. Strike of textile workers at Gulbahar. Strike of workers at Jabal us-Siraj. Second strike of Ghouri Cement Plant workers on June 4. Strike of Norabeh goldminers, Takhar. Strike of Hajeri-Nadjeri workers against German technicians on June 5. Second strike of Pul-i-Khumri textile workers on June 6. Strike at Qandahar Fruit Co. when thirty-five workers were laid off. Strikes at Hazrat Imam and Spinzar Cotton Co. at Qunduz. Peasants joined port workers at Bandar Sher Khan on June 6. Jangalak strike explodes into violence.	Strike at Teachers Training School in support of Qunduz workers. Strike of students to back workers in Gulbahar. Strike of students at Jabal us-Siraj in support of workers and to demonstrate against principal. Strike of Pakhtia Teachers Training School and high-school students for library improvement, for a free press, against American testing, and against colonialists and landlords on June 4 and 5. Strike at Afghan Institute of Technology continues. Strike at Kabul University by Faculty of Education students. (Strikes of Faculties of Law and Medicine continue until June 27.) Students joined workers and peasants in Qunduz strike.

Note: Most of the strikes remain unsettled, but a few have paid off. For example: the Education Press agreed to pay its employees 15 additional afghanis a day as lunch-money, and to pay double for overtime; Kabul University agreed to revise the curriculum (more content-oriented courses and less on the techniques of teaching); and the Pul-i-Khumri textile workers got a raise, but little else.

The occasional student support for the workers' strikes—even, in some cases, support by grammar-school students—has surprised many in Kabul. Indeed, some observers, especially foreigners, have expressed amazement that, given the over-all cultural scene, the strikes should have occurred at all. It should not be too surprising, however. In classrooms, the students often refuse to listen to anti-Marxist views, and an atmosphere has been created in which few academics can favorably discuss anything relating to the West. I do not myself believe that the student population is "pro-Communist" (whatever that means today); rather, I believe that their attitudes, and their strikes and demonstrations, are a response to the real inequities in their society as they see them. They attack those ideologies—primarily Islam and Western materialistic philosophies—which they believe have created the inequities and which, as they see it, jointly control the country and ultimately their own destinies.

Have all the disturbances by students and workers been part of a united effort? Well, it seems to me that the problems of the nature and inspiration of the strikes can best be considered together. The existing state of communications today encourages, I believe, the rise in worldwide student-worker demonstrations. The news of a strike at Berkeley, of a riot at Columbia, or of students and workers at the barricades in Paris sweeps around the world in hours—and every town and village in Afghanistan has its quota of transistor radios. The student disturbances in Afghanistan can be seen as an extension and part of the general student unrest throughout the world; and the involvement of Afghan students and teachers, in turn, becomes a logical development if one remembers that the impassioned student demonstrators of Sehum-i-Aqrab in 1965 have now mostly become teachers and officials in the provinces. Naturally, they keep up contacts with old friends and get together as often as possible. Thus cells are born, ideas proliferate, and action begins. Disgruntled at being away from the intellectual center, Kabul, and nursing a grudge against the "Establishment" which first brought them to the capital and then sent them back to rural areas, these teachers pass on their attitudes, together with their special knowledge, to their students—and sometimes, indeed, to their students' parents, particularly if they work in one of the many factories run by the government or private monopolies. Everything considered, I find it surprising that more co-ordinated student-worker disturbances have not taken place, and I am sure that they will increase in the future.

I still believe—as I believed after the riots of 1965—that most of the strikes and demonstrations are largely caused by home-grown dissatisfaction. Of course, neither the Americans, the Russians, nor

the Chinese will pass up an opportunity to gain friends, influence policy, and—not least—embarrass opponents through growing student-worker unrest; but there are enough inequities at home to bring about the disturbances without importing foreign ideologies. It can only be hoped that Afghan executive and legislative leaders, as well as foreign observers, will be able to distinguish between what is local and what is not; and that the opposition, pressured from all sides, will "keep its cool" and accept only such assistance as will not bring on justifiable charges of external interference in internal Afghan affairs.

As with the more irresponsible actions of the Wolesi Jirgah and the free press, I consider the student riots and demonstrations to be more evolutionary and educational than revolutionary. However, with expanding education and increasing awareness, evolutionary processes might well develop into revolutionary processes if the government does not keep pace with legitimate aspirations.

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